

22. Some Notes on the Niata Breed of Cattle (*Bos taurus*).

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(Text-figures 1 & 2.)

VARIATION.

WHEN Charles Darwin * published in 'The Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle,' more than 80 years ago, his account of this curious race, he attributed its then rarity and probable extinction to the abnormal formation of the lips, which rendered browsing difficult in times of drought, *i. e.* when the pasture became very short. Be that as it may, its career would seem to be now nearly ended. Dr. W. J. Holland, in his very interesting book 'To the River Plate and Back,' p. 117 (1912-13), sums up its epitome as follows:—"Dr. Bruch, the learned Curator of Zoology at the Museum of La Plata, informs me that the race is either verging upon extinction, or has already become totally extinct. Although it is still reported to survive in the Province of Catamarca, Dr. Bruch told me that a German naturalist, who recently visited Argentina for the express purpose of studying these creatures, and travelled widely in quest of them, was unable to see or secure a single specimen" †. I have an impression of reading very recently in a director's report of his visit to one of the Estancias belonging to his Company in North Patagonia, that he saw quite a number of Niata cattle; but it is to be feared that what he saw and what his Company is the proud possessor of, were only some shockingly bad Creole animals of the old type.

In the 'La Nacion' newspaper of 14th May, 1890, or nearly a quarter of a century ago, Señor Ramon Lista (Argentine explorer and naturalist) published an open letter, directed to Dr. Francisco P. Moreno, of which the following is a translation:—

"*An Interesting Animal.*—The actual great Agricultural Show (Palermo, Buenos Aires) presents much that is admirable in respect of its livestock; but with all frankness, I must confess that what has most aroused my curiosity as a naturalist is a little snub-nosed cow, which might well be denominated Cow-dog from its resemblance to a Bull-dog, of which it has the same defiant and sneering expression, produced by the permanent retraction of the upper lip, leaving the teeth exposed in a manner similar to that breed of dogs.

* This breed was further discussed by Darwin ('Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication,' i. pp. 109-111, ed. 1905) and by Romanes ('Darwin and after Darwin,' ii. p. 192), who published a figure of the skull described by Owen.

† The skull figured by Dr. Holland is nearly intermediate in length of jaw between the skull of ordinary cattle and that of the Niata breed figured by Romanes.

"It is the property of Mr. Ernest Gibson, of Ajó*, who intends sending it to the Zoological Society of London, in whose natural history museum † exists a skeleton of the same animal, studied and described by the celebrated naturalist Professor Owen.

"The Ajó cow is almost a dwarf. The head is small and the lower jaw very projecting. In its other characteristics it presents nothing notable beyond a continual restlessness, well in keeping with its wild disposition, and marked contrast with the placidity of the large and beautiful European breeds surrounding it.

"The Cow-dog is perhaps at this date an example of atavism, unique in this country, of a breed produced naturally in the Pampas of Buenos Aires, and very recently extirpated by the foremost Argentine stockbreeders, who were naturally afraid of the increase in their herds of a race of so little utility and unadapted for the struggle for existence, inasmuch as it was the first to succumb in the great droughts when the abnormal conformation of the jaw-bones handicapped it in grazing on the scanty and shortened pasture.

"In the time of the tyrant Rosas it was believed that the Niatas constituted an indigenous race which had nothing to do with the cattle imported from Paraguay by the brothers Goëss in 1558.

"Later on it has been said that they originated from an African breed, introduced on both sides of the River Plate. This latter supposition has been based upon the existence in Equatorial Africa of bovine animals which resemble, though remotely, the Niata type of the Pampas. But up to date, so far as is known, no one has been able to produce any proof in reference to the importation to the Argentine or Uruguay of bulls or cows from that country.

"In my opinion, the Niata type is nothing more than a variety of the primitive bovine type, introduced into the country by the Goëss brothers, and later on propagated in the Pampean zone comprehended between the Sierra ranges of Tandil and Ventana.

"On this hypothesis, the question arises as to the manner in which this strange breed should have evolved itself in a strain so notably distinct from the ordinary Creole class.

"First of all, whoever has read the 'Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology' (admirable investigations of the illustrious Darwin) will recall what he states regarding the transitory appearance in France of the Niata type of the Plate, which has since been confirmed from other parts of Europe; but it has been described as hornless and of a less accentuated prognathism.

* The district of Ajó, pronounced "Ah-hó," lies at the mouth of the estuary of the River Plate, near Cape San Antonio.

† [The skeleton is in the Museum of the R. Coll. Surgeons.—EDITOR P. Z. S.]

“These data, which nevertheless should be taken with some reserve, lead one to imagine the existence of a possible primitive European Niata type, the progenitor of that of America; but perhaps the said instances were in reality only casual monstrosities, and in nowise to be confounded with permanent variations of races.”

The head of the individual cow alluded to at the beginning of the foregoing article is figured in the accompanying photograph (text-fig. 1), the skull (text-fig. 2) being that of its mother.

Text-figure 1.

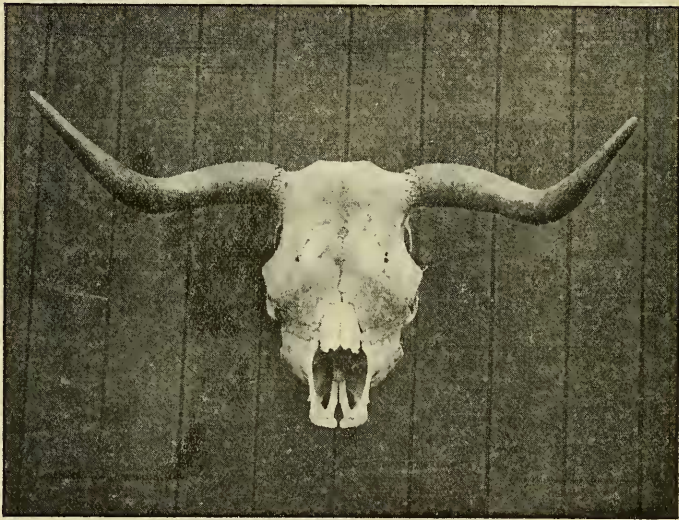


Head of living example of Niata cow.

Some time in 1889 I was informed of their existence in the possession of a neighbour (a widow occupying a small piece of land in the township of Ajó), and after a little difficulty succeeded in buying them; but my agent could learn nothing of their origin. The family-group consisted of three generations—a very old cow, her daughter, and the calf of the latter; the last presented only the usual characteristics of the prevalent Creole breed, and consequently was promptly converted into veal! Its mother went to the Rural Exhibition in Buenos Ayres the following year, as chronicled by Don Ramon Lista, in company with some fine stock; and when the Show was closed I transferred it (at Dr. Moreno's request) to the Zoological Park. How long it lived there subsequently I cannot tell; but I should not

be surprized to learn that the skull figured in Dr. Holland's book as existent in the La Plata Museum belongs to the animal in question. The old cow was of a totally different disposition from her daughter, being perfectly tame and placid. She was kept in a little lucerne-paddock at the back of my Estancia business office, and would frequently approach close to, and gaze through, the windows. But I confess that I never glanced up on feeling the shadow cast on my desk, and met the aspect of her extraordinary visage in such close proximity, without experiencing a distinct thrill and shock of almost terror. She died also in due time of sheer old age whilst I was in England, and unfortunately the lower jaw was not retained for me along with the skull.

Text-figure 2.



Skull of old Niata cow.

During some forty years residence in the River Plate (mostly in the country districts), it has not been my good fortune to gather any further information regarding the Niata type. Even before the present improvement on the original Creole race had made any way, and when many many thousand head of cattle had passed under my notice, I never saw a single example on either margin of the River Plate. Since 1890 until recently (1914) this skull and photograph hung on the walls of my Estancia office in Ajó, and were frequently commented upon by visitors; but though some few of these had heard of the breed, their personal knowledge reached no further. The one exception,

an English friend, told me that as a boy in Uruguay (Department of San José), about the year 1870, he well remembers a little herd of seven or eight Niata cows with their accompanying bull. They belonged to a Uruguayan neighbour, were exceedingly tame and (in those days of no fences) were always trespassing, it being his privilege and delight to chase them back into their own territory. The prevalent colour seems to have been dun, with black legs (resembling the Jersey?). An impressive characteristic was the bulldog-like habit of "sniffling" whenever the muzzle was raised from the ground (a habit I also had particularly noted). In 1880 there came one or two solitary cows, accompanying bought troops of ordinary cattle; these had probably been thrown in by the seller for the drover's consumption. Subsequently my informant lived thirty years in the Argentine (on a central Buenos Ayrean estancia), but never again met the quaint friends of his youth.

[NOTE.—The skull of the old Niata cow shown in text-fig. 2 has been presented to the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) by Mr. Gibson.—Editor, P. Z. S.]